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ABSTRACT

One segment of a larger study examined literacy activities occurring within the homes of immigrant families in Chicago's Mexican-American community. During the first year and a half of fieldwork, literacy practices seemed minimal and infrequent. However, further analysis indicated that such practices were occurring, and were woven into the fabric of family life. Within the community and the home, a variety of print in English and Spanish was available. Literacy was found not to be taken for granted, but was actively taught by parents. Literate adults within the social network were held in high regard. Proficiency in literacy appeared to be linked to childhood opportunity for schooling, with a clear trend toward increased literacy with each new generation. Even older adults indicated great interest in some literary texts. It was concluded that these families, especially as a social network, have considerable expertise with literacy, routinely handling literacy demands in this as well as other domains, and consistently indicating interest in improving their literacy skills. However, it is noted that development of literacy extension efforts must take into consideration the community's perception of the place of literacy in its life and respect its cultural values. A 58-item bibliography is included. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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BILITERACY IN THE HOME:

PRACTICES AMONG MEXICANO FAMILIES IN CHICAGO

paper prepared for

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INTRODUCTION: DEFINING LITERACY

Many scholars have struggled in recent years to define more precisely what literacy is. Clearly literacy cannot be reduced to one definition (Graff, 1986,1987); "a plurality of literacies" (Szwed, 1981) more accurately reflects literacy practices that vary from context to context. Definitions of literacy, then, range rather widely, but usually cluster around two concepts: one is "functional" (or basic) literacy and the other is "essayist" (often meaning text-level) literacy (Olson, 1977; Scollon and Scollon, 1981). Heath (1987) has suggested the terms literacy skills and literate behaviors to refer to the cognitive and linguistic processes behind these two general conceptions of literacy. Distinguishing literacy skills (the encoding and decoding of a writing system, or basic reading and writing) from literate behaviors (using problem-solving and knowledge-creating abilities) may have clarified some problems in literacy-defining, particularly in providing terms for common conceptions of literacy, but it has led to other problems.

Ethnographic research on literacy among particular groups of people (Scribner and Cole, 1981; Tannen, 1982, 1984; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Shuman, 1986) has countered effectively the earlier assertion of some scholars that literacy and orality were essentially a dichotomy (Olson, 1977; Ong, 1982), and that entire groups of people, even in complex literate societies, had "oral" cultures and thus were unable to think abstractly (e.g., Farrell, 1983). Ethnographic research on literacy has shown clearly that

oral and written language (in societies which use a writing system) overlap in subtle ways and are often used within the same communication event. Recently, however, some have taken this finding even further and have argued that literacy can be an entirely oral activity; that is, rather than using oral language to discuss or otherwise "take off" on a piece of print (e.g., Heath, 1983), some have argued that literacy can mean using oral language in ways that are considered "literate" without involving any print at all (Gee, 1989; Vasquez, 1989).

One problem with this view is that it doesn't allow for distinctions between languages/cultures with no writing system (i.e., non-literate societies) and those with writing. And it has been argued with both historical and ethnographic evidence that, over time, writing does make a difference in cultures (Goody, 1986, 1987), although not the "great leap" that was originally claimed by some scholars (Goody and Watt, 1963; Goody, 1977; Olson, 1977; Ong, 1982). Finnegan (1989), in a careful synthesis of anthropological work which bears on the orality - literacy debate, concludes that the invention of writing acts as an "enabling" factor, which, along with other social factors (e.g., the development of paper from trees), can stimulate significant changes in a culture.

Ultimately, one arena in which change may occur is in the use of oral language, as "feedback" from literacy to oral language (Goody, 1987); thus the oral language of those who are immersed in written texts begins to resemble the written language of their

culture. Because of this "feedback," some oral language use can be quite "literate" in the sense that it reflects characteristics of literate traditions of a particular culture. In my view, however, this phenomenon doesn't justify claiming that using solely oral language (e.g., in the construction of personal narratives) is a literacy activity, even though it may involve, for example, some analytic thinking. Finnegan's (1989) synthesis provides abundant evidence that non-literate peoples engage in the kinds of thinking that in our culture are termed "literate," but they do not do so with writing. To say, then, that what these peoples, or other groups, do solely with oral language is "literacy" eliminates this distinction between literate and non-literate societies. We then would have to claim that the invention of writing in various cultures around the world was relatively insignificant in human history. Clearly, although no "great leap," writing is not an insignificant development, primarily because of its ability to extend communication over space and time.

Undoubtedly, something very important is at stake when so much energy is spent on--and such controversy surrounds--the defining of a phenomenon such as literacy. What is at stake here are the political implications of various definitions. Depending on the definition, entire groups of people can be labeled "illiterate." For example, if literacy is defined as using "higher order" critical thinking (i.e., analytic logic and other "abstract" cognitive processes) in written language, then those who use written language only in "functional" ways (i.e., to function

pragmatically in daily life) can be said to be "illiterate."

In fact, recent research has shown that relatively few adults in the United States can be said to be non-literate (NAEP, 1986), although those who use literacy skills but, supposedly, not literate behaviors (at least not with writing), have been termed "semi-literate" (Miller, 1988). In this way, the economic problems of the "underclass," or of the working classes more generally, can be seen as their own problem: members of these groups are not literate enough to perform jobs which would yield them more money. Wilson (1987), however, has shown that the economic problems of what he termed the "underclass" (and has revised to "the ghetto poor") are the result of structural changes in the economy, not group or individual factors. Moreover, some research has shown that literacy often is used to screen potential employees, even when it is not actually needed on the job (Levine, 1986). Thus it does not seem to be clear that, even if everyone were fully literate, everyone could be fully employed.

Workforce 2000, a report of the U.S. Department of Labor, claims that there soon will be numerous jobs, but that many people will not have the skills (including literacy--or perhaps the cognitive style associated with literate behaviors) to perform these jobs. This claim is based on an expectation that jobs in an increasingly automated workplace will require new kinds of abilities and skills. As increasing numbers of women and minorities are entering the workforce, it is apparently these groups in particular who may need further training. Researchers

may be skeptical, as I am, about these predictions, but we have limited evidence about the actual uses of literacy in a variety of work situations with which to argue with those who make the claims.

What do we actually know of the role of literacy in the workplace? This question is central to the controversy over how literacy is defined, since defining literacy will affect what kind of literacy is taught in school, and one (though not the only) justification for a particular kind of literacy instruction is that it prepares students for the workplace. Reviews of work in this area have indicated that:

- o literacy demands can vary greatly from one place of work to another,
- o many blue as well as white collar jobs do involve almost daily literacy activity,
- o much of this literacy activity (especially for blue collar work) involves the filling out of forms, and
- o more work in this area is needed in a variety of settings to determine the range of variation in the level of literacy from one place of work to another and to provide an in-depth view of writing processes, functions, and social contexts (Jacob, 1982; Mikulecky, 1982).

In my own ethnographic research with Mexican-origin families in Chicago, I have found the demand for literacy at work to vary widely. In some of the jobs family members hold, no literacy is required at all (e.g., in a poultry processing plant where a workforce of virtually all Mexican women debone, weigh, and pack

chicken breasts and other parts), whereas in others, women (with as few as two years of formal schooling in Mexico, in Spanish) are struggling to write reports in English as part of a quality control process in a factory. As researchers have noted, people in such jobs often perform beyond their apparent level of literacy skills (Diehl and Mikulecky, 1988; Cintron, 1989; Crandall, 1981), using contextual information to complete tasks which they probably would be unable to complete under experimental, out-of-context conditions.

It is not totally clear, then, what role(s) literacy plays, or doesn't play, in all settings across the workplace domain. While initial work in this area has shown literacy activity to be involved in many jobs, we need more in-depth, on-site ethnographic studies to describe workplace literacy activity more fully and, importantly, to compare employer and employee perceptions of this activity (Gundlach, Farr, and Cook-Gumperz, 1989). Finally, we have insufficient generalizable evidence at this point to determine conclusively how important literacy is in the employability of people, although we do know that this seems to vary greatly from context to context, even within the same job level in the same industry (Jacob, 1982).

Our knowledge gaps, in addition to the variation in literacy activity researchers already have found, thus lend limited clarity at the present time to the controversy over how literacy should be defined--or whose literacy should provide the model for this definition. Graff (1981) has pointed out, however, that only

(functional) literacy skills can be considered universal, since what people do with these skills varies from culture to culture and throughout history. Also, this level of literacy may be the most widely and frequently used by many segments of the population in this country, whether or not "essayist" literacy is used as well by some of them. Virtually everyone has to deal with forms (i.e., the literacy of large public institutions) in one aspect or another of their lives, whether at work or at home. The teaching of "essayist" literacy, in both oral and written activities at school, then becomes a separate question, justified not just on economic, but on civic, including political, grounds. My working definition of literacy, then, like Graff's, is that of Heath's literacy skills: communication which involves encoding (writing) and/or decoding (reading) with a writing system. My choice of functional literacy as the working definition of "literacy" itself is supported by the fact that this definition generally reflects the (emic) view of literacy held by the Mexican families with whom I have been working. That is, the members of these families generally view literacy as the decoding and encoding of language with a writing system, in this case either the Spanish or the English alphabet.[1]

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[1]Many of the parents have remarked to me on various occasions that literacy is "easier" in Spanish than in English, since the Spanish alphabet matches spoken sounds more closely than English letters do, i.e., you really can "sound out" printed words fairly accurately. In addition, I have observed both adults and children sounding out printed words in Spanish, syllable by syllable. In one incident, a young boy won an argument with his cousin over the writing of someone's name (and other words) because the cousin had left out crucial sounds, and thus letters.

THE MEXICAN-ORIGIN LANGUAGE AND LITERACY PROJECT[2]

The Mexican-origin Language and Literacy Project at the University of Illinois at Chicago has as its overall goal the description of oral and written language patterns in the Mexican-origin community of Chicago. Our preliminary work in the two (contiguous) most concentrated Mexican-origin neighborhoods in Chicago indicated at least three major sub-groups in this community: Mexicanos (immigrants raised in Mexico), Mexican Americans raised in Chicago (who generally prefer the terms Mexican or Mexican American to Chicano), and Mexican Americans raised in Texas (who often refer to themselves as tejanos). The first phase of this project has investigated language and literacy among Mexicanos, or Mexican immigrants, in this community (Elias-Olivares, 1990; Farr, 1989, forthcoming; Guerra, forthcoming). We hope that future studies will provide a closer look at the two groups of Mexican Americans described above.

For several years I have participated in the lives of families within one social network of Mexicanos in the heart of the Mexican-origin community in Chicago. A social network, a conceptual tool

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[2]We are grateful to the National Science Foundation, Linguistics Program, for supporting the first year and a half of this study, by providing a grant to myself and Lucia Elias-Olivares. Juan Guerra, a Ph.D. student of mine, worked as a co-ethnographer with us during that time. I am additionally grateful to the Spencer Foundation for funding another two years of the study, by providing me a grant through August, 1992.

of anthropology (see review in Hannerz, 1980), is comprised of one center person (in the present case, family) and all immediate kin and close friends. In methodological terms, a researcher starts by getting to know one center person or family, and works his/her way "out" to the other people or families close to the center. For Mexicans this involves both kin and compadrazco (godparent-like) relationships, and the network itself (like the family) is of central importance in all facets of social life. Approximately 11 families (about 75 people) comprise the "inner circle" of this particular network, and, in keeping with the gender-based activity patterns of these (culturally conservative) families, my participant-observation has been primarily, but by no means exclusively, with the women and children. Currently I am continuing to gather data on the literacy practices (in both Spanish and English) of these families and on female verbal performances, in all-female contexts, of jokes, stories, and arguments (what I am calling "oral folk texts").

This work is being carried out within the framework of the ethnography of communication as conceptualized by Hymes (1974) and as extended by Hymes (1981/1975) and Bauman (1977/1975). Within this framework, speaking (and reading and writing) are viewed as ways of communicating that are characteristic of a particular cultural group; context is crucial to the interpretation of behavior; and linguistic behavior is inextricably connected to (and reflective of) social meaning. Thus the women's jokes, for example, reflect social meanings to insiders of the group, and it

is only through long-term participant-observation that an outsider can discern these meanings.

In this chapter I will provide a partial description of the literacy practices of these families. In analyzing my data, I have chosen to focus on domains in which literacy is used, rather than upon the functions of each literacy activity, as have other researchers (Heath, 1983; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), because so many literacy activities serve multiple functions. For example, a particular use of written Spanish or English (e.g., reading a letter from a government agency) may serve both instrumental and social-interactional functions. In contrast, viewing literacy activities as occurring in broad domains within the lives of family members allowed a more social, and less individual, perspective on my data.

In focusing on domains, I adapted a framework provided by Goody (1986), which synthesizes anthropological and historical studies of writing in societies all over the world. Goody posits four large domains ("along the lines of the frequently accepted sub-systems of society", p.xvi) in which writing has been central historically: religion, economy, politics (the state), and law. These families, as do virtually all families living in the United States, regularly interact with print issued from large institutions in these four domains: the church, commerce, the state, and the law.

As Goody points out, these domains can and often do overlap and for the purposes of my analysis, I collapsed two of his

domains: those of the state and the law. I did so because the recent U.S. amnesty process for undocumented workers, in which these families participated, essentially combined the interests of these two domains, and the written forms encountered and responded to during this process represented both the state and the law. In addition, however, my data show literacy practices in these families extending beyond Goody's four societal domains; thus in my analysis I have added to his framework two additional domains: that of education (both large institutional and personal), and that of the family/home (as the only private, rather than public, institution). My revision of Goody's framework, then, results in a description of literacy practices among Mexican immigrant families within five primary domains: the church, commerce, the state/the law, education, and family/home.

Particularly relevant to the concerns of this book (and of the colloquium which preceded it) is the domain of family/home, especially in light of current policy concerns: not only is this domain the only one of the five which is exclusively private (education as a domain includes both private/informal and public/formal activities, and the three remaining domains, the church, commerce, and the state/the law, entirely represent public institutions), but there is much contemporary controversy over whether or not, and if so, how, government agencies should "intervene" in family literacy practices, given that it is a private domain (Szwed, 1981; Auberbach, 1989). Elsewhere (Farr, forthcoming) I provide a fuller description of all five domains,

representing both public and private institutions.

FAMILY LITERACY PRACTICES

During the first year and a half of fieldwork, literacy practices seemed to us minimal and infrequent, possibly because these activities were not foregrounded by participants themselves, but were inconspicuously interwoven with daily activities. Another reason that the literacy activities of these families seemed so minimal to us was due to the fact that literacy materials are generally stored away, out of sight. Magazines, for example, are kept neatly inside the compartments below the top of the coffee table in the living room; they are brought out only when they are to be used. A complete set of hardback religious books is also stored away, e.g., up in a cupboard in a back bedroom. Finally, all meaningful papers (certificates, records, and other papers seen as important) are stored in a special place like the parents' bedroom, in either a box, a valise, or a bag. It is worth noting that many papers seen as important enough to be stored away by members of these families (e.g., receipts from telephone calls placed to or from Mexico through commercial long distance offices) seemed to me unimportant; it may be that virtually all pieces of writing are viewed as potentially having importance (and the Simpson-Rodino bill of 1986 may have proven these families right).

In spite of the surface "invisibility" of literacy artifacts, however, a recent computer search through two sets of fieldnotes from the project revealed a very different picture from that of

our initial impression. Theme words involving literacy occurred continuously throughout both sets of fieldnotes; the following list should indicate the regular presence of literacy in the lives of these families:

read/reading
write/writing/written/wrote
draw
copy/copied
list, note
print
telegram, mail, letter(s)
bill(s), receipt(s)
invitation(s)
page, word(s), paper(s)
book(let), TV guide, magazine
catalogue
map
library
literate/literacy
form(s), application(s)
contract(s)
certificate(s), record(s)
advertisement
worksheet
homework, study(ing), test
checking account
sign(ature)
doctrina/catechism

Literacy activities are woven into the ongoing stream of family life. Print, in both Spanish and English, is omnipresent both within the neighborhood and within homes. Outside, in the neighborhood, stores display a multitude of signs primarily in Spanish (e.g., "Discolandia" for a music store, "Abarrotes" for a grocery store), less frequently in English (e.g., MacDonald's--although there is both an English and a Spanish menu inside on the wall behind the counter), and sometimes in both languages together (e.g., a bar that advertises "Tenemos Via Satellite" to indicate

they have cable television). Within homes, print also abounds in both Spanish and English:

- o labels on cans of food (usually in English, but on items imported from Mexico in Spanish),
- o wall calendars (same type as in Mexico, and in Spanish)
- o audiotapes (the music is usually Mexican or Mexican American, so the packaging print is usually in Spanish),
- o magazines (either religious or with a focus on health and beauty for women, and usually in Spanish; the TV Guide is the exception in English),
- o newspapers (the Chicago Sun Times in English and local weeklies, e.g., La Raza and El Diario, in Spanish),
- o invitations printed especially for a formal event (and addressed and signed by hand), usually at the church (to baptisms, quinceaneras which celebrate daughters turning 15, or special masses and parties which celebrate major birthdays such as the fiftieth,
- o letters (personal ones to and from Mexico are in Spanish; official ones from government agencies are usually in English--although deportation notices are printed in both languages; other official letters, e.g. from a school, are in Spanish or both languages),
- o documents, certificates, and other records (in both Spanish and English, depending primarily upon country of origin--Mexico or the U.S.)
- o books (those children use for their schoolwork--which are

in English and Spanish, depending on whether the child is below third grade and in bilingual education or above third grade and in English-only classes--and those which are religious in nature, either for catechism class or more general purposes), and

- television (because the families have cable television, three of the several dozen channels are entirely in Spanish, so when print is displayed on the screen, which it frequently is, it is in Spanish as well).

In short, there is an abundance of print in the home environment, and much of it is in Spanish. This is not surprising since these are immigrant families in which the parents were raised in Mexico; literacy artifacts printed in English are more common in the homes where there are other family members, especially teenagers and/or young adults, who are fluent in English (having been raised, if not born, in Chicago).

As should be clear from the above list, there is substantial literacy activity within the family/home domain in these Mexican families. Much of this activity is similar to that found in studies of other populations: rural working class white and black families, as well as black and white middle class "townspeople" in the southeast (Heath, 1983); white middle class families in the northeast (Taylor, 1983), and black inner-city families in the northeast (Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). I haven't, however, observed frequent literacy activity in the realm of literature (fiction and non-fiction books and poetry) that Taylor and Dorsey-

Gaines (1988) describe among the inner-city black families they studied, or the reading and joint discussion of newspaper and other printed items that Heath (1983) describes for the rural black families she studied.

Within the Mexican families I have come to know, literacy is not viewed as something to be taken for granted, something that children will acquire naturally, in contrast to what Taylor (1983) found with her white, middle class families (and, possibly, as can be inferred from the studies of black families by Heath and by Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines). Taylor's white, middle class families, like those studied by Gundlach, McLane, Stott, and McNamee (1985), were even playful with literacy in their interactions with their children because they assumed all of their children would become literate, i.e., it wasn't something they, the parents, needed to work on. While this no doubt doesn't characterize all middle class parents (e.g., there are those who are so anxious about their children learning to read or write that it causes problems for the children in doing so), many working class parents, depending on the state of schools in their neighborhoods, can't take literacy for granted at all. McLane and McNamee (1990), in fact, describe black inner-city mothers in Chicago who explicitly teach literacy skills to their children in an attempt to ensure that they become literate, with or without the public school.

Similarly, I have observed Mexican parents explicitly teaching literacy skills to their children. In one case, a mother held her youngest child (about 4 years old) on her lap, grasped his hand in

hers, and carefully guided him in making the letters of the alphabet, one by one. Like the parents in Delgado-Gaitan's study (1989), these parents also provide strong support for, and belief in, formal education, insisting children do homework before watching television or playing with other children; they also assist with the homework when they can, especially if it is in Spanish, from a child's bilingual education program. Another mother regularly insists that her children practice their multiplication tables, especially when I arrive, at which times she directs them to do whatever "lesson" I teach them. Clearly, (being a maestra, or teacher) I am a resource that this mother doesn't want to waste. To oblige, I improvise "writing lessons" on the spot and do the best with mathematics that I can.

Although literacy is not always accompanied by schooling (Scribner and Cole, 1981; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Farr, 1989 and forthcoming), it is generally seen in these Mexican families as connected to schooling; even those who learned it informally or liricamente[3], outside of school insist that it must be taught explicitly. It is not something one can learn oneself--one needs to learn from someone else who already knows the writing system, i.e., the letters of the alphabet, usually someone who has learned them in school. Both literacy and schooling, then, are

[3]The concept of "lyrical" learning (learning informally, without books, orally, about practical things) is shared throughout this social network and by their friends and relatives with whom I talked in Michoacan and Guanajuato. Farr (forthcoming) discusses it more fully.

taken seriously, and as something that cannot be taken for granted as developing in the natural course of events. In many of the lives of the adults of this network, schooling and literacy were privileges not afforded to everyone.

An illustration of the high regard these network members have for schooling was revealed during the first "amnesty class" we held in one family's home (in exchange for their participaition in our research, we offered to help them through the amnesty process). I was struck by how serious and earnest everyone was: in a flurry of ardent activity, extra chairs were brought into the living room and lined up in rows, pencils were located and sharpened, notebooks readied, children quieted, and expectant faces turned toward the maestros. Most surprising to me was that everyone participated, including children of all ages, in spite of the fact that only the adults would undergo the amnesty process. Moreover, other adults in the network sometimes participated in our weekly class, even when they already had green cards. The message was clear: schooling was very important, and one should use every opportunity to learn what one could.

Many of these adults had had little opportunity during their childhoods in Mexico to go to school, often attending only a few years. Most of the older adult members (in their thirties and forties), in fact, have had fewer than five or six years of formal schooling, all of which was in Mexico, in Spanish. A number of the middle-aged men from one particular village in Mexico had almost no formal schooling, yet are functionally literate in their

current lives because they learned how to write outside of school, after migrating to the U.S., in order to write letters back home (Farr, 1989 and forthcoming). Many of the younger adults (in their twenties) finished secundaria in Mexico (the equivalent of U.S. middle school); a common view in these families is that one doesn't go on to preparatoria (the equivalent of U.S. high school) unless one intends to go on to college, or to a specific career.

Although these individuals would be counted in this country as "drop-outs" because they have not graduated from the U.S. version of high school, it is clear to me that they don't consider themselves drop-outs. Moreover, their education has prepared them to meet many of the literacy demands in their lives, and network members more proficient in literacy help those who are less proficient with more demanding literacy tasks. Literacy, like other resources (e.g., knowledge of automobile repair, or of health remedies) is shared; other studies of Mexican social networks (Horowitz, 1986; Velez-Ibañez and Greenberg, 1989) have found a similarly extensive sharing of resources. Within these Chicago families, those who are more literate tend to be those who have had more schooling, and those who have had more schooling tend to be younger. The youngest generation (those in their teens and younger), having been raised almost entirely in Chicago, are finishing high school here, and some of them are going on to college or other schools. Proficiency in literacy, then, is primarily a matter of childhood opportunity, with a clear trend itoward more literacy across the generations in these families.

Even the older adults in the network, regardless of the level of schooling they were able to reach, indicate a great deal of interest in some literate texs. During a month in Mexico with some of the family members, I shared books I had located at El Colegio de Michoacan in Zamora, about an hour by bus from one of the ranchos (small rural communities).[4] Many network members showed intense interest in two books in particular: Más Allá de los Caminos: Los Rancheros del Potrero de Herrera (Far Beyond the Roads: the Rancheros of Potrero of Herrera) by Esteban Barragán López (1990), and La Villa de Tinqüindin de Arqandar (The Village of Tinquindin of Arqandar) by Ramon Pardo Pulido (1957).

The former, Más Allá de los Caminos, was recognized by some network members who had heard of it before. It is a study of ranchos in a nearby, more isolated area (the local tierra caliente, a hotter and drier region than their own, which is closer to the cooler sierra area of Michoacan, as well as closer to paved roads). One woman, in fact, pointed out the author (currently on the faculty at El Colegio de Michoacan) in one of the photographs in the book, saying he had grown up in one of the ranchos he studied. Another network member was so excited about the book that he began reading it immediately and finally agreed to my suggestion that he keep it awhile, to read at his leisure. When I left the rancho a

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[4]I am very grateful to Gail Mummert and others at this institution for suggesting references to recent and ongoing studies of the region, and for help in locating census data and a history of the area from which the social network discussed in this chapter originated.

week or so later, he offered to return the book to me, but I declined, having bought another copy for myself. Now my second copy is in demand by yet other families in the network; clearly, I could have given many copies of this book to interested people. Later I was told by various people that it was "an important book" because it had many important things to say about the people of the tierra caliente, reputed to be very tough rancheros (small landowners).

The second book which stirred great interest was a local history of the municipality (Tingüindin) and its nearby ranchos, including their own. Before I located this book, one man had told me a story handed down in his family about their ancestors from Spain; when I told him of the book, he asked for it (and his daughter to get his reading glasses) and again began reading immediately. I waited 45 minutes that evening at the kitchen table with him while he read. At one point he called my attention to a passage in the book which contained his family name, seeming to corroborate his family's story. Subsequently, there was so much interest in this book as well (I was unable to obtain another copy, as it is out of print) that I xeroxed the entire book before leaving the rancho. Upon returning to Chicago, I encountered yet more interest in this book, like the other one.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I have reviewed briefly the controversy surrounding the definition of literacy, a complex matter since

literacy varies so from context to context; I also have considered what is known about workplace literacy (not enough) that might shed light on attempts at definition. I have argued that the controversy over definition stems from the political implications inherent in any attempts at definition, and, finally, that it seems more sensible at this time to use the only universal definition of literacy, knowledge and use of a writing system, as a working definition. My own choice in doing so is further supported by the fact that this is the conception of literacy generally held by the members of the social network of Mexican families with whom I have been working.

These families, especially as a social network, have considerable expertise with literacy. They routinely handle literacy demands from a variety of domains in their lives; in this chapter I have provided descriptions of their literacy practices in one of these domains, that of the family/home. In the other four domains, large public institutions (which require the use of a writing system for their very existence) regularly provide additional literacy demands: the church in a variety of religious events, factories and other businesses where network members work, large corporations (e.g., Tupperware) which sustain network members' small businesses, and finally, government agencies like the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

These families cope very well with these demands. This is so in spite of the fact that virtually all adult members have less

than a high school education. Yet their preparation in literacy, from relatively scant formal schooling, has enabled them to participate in modern urban life. From their point of view, life in Chicago may have its drawbacks (it's colder, for one thing), but they are making more money here than they currently could in Mexico; their lives, then, are better than they would have been had they not migrated.

To say, however, that these family members are functioning well with the literacy demands in their lives is not to say that there is no interest among them in becoming "more" literate, i.e., in reading or writing more extended texts, and becoming more proficient and fluent with literacy, as is evident in their intense interest in the books I shared with them. Literacy progams which attempt to build on the interests of learners clearly could be effective with members of these families.

A number of scholars have worked to broaden traditional education, for both adults and children, by using information gathered (often through ethnographic research) in community and home contexts (Heath, 1983; Moll and Diaz, 1987; Auberbach, 1989; among others). Undoubtedly, these kinds of approaches would be appropriate and welcomed by the network members with whom I have been working, since they would encourage already expressed interest in literate texts particularly relevant to their lives.

A word of caution, however, is in order. First of all, a group's own perceptions of phenomena such as literacy cannot be ignored if a literacy program is to be effective. In this case,

network members share a perception of literacy as "something apart," as something generally linked to formal schooling, as a technology to learn for use in their own lives. This runs counter to many descriptions of literacy in the research literature, which focus on its humanistic, creative, or consciousness-raising aspects (e.g., Freire, 1973; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Walsh, 1990). Such descriptions, in fact, parallel those used in other research literatures (e.g., literary criticism, ethnography of communication, even psychotherapy) as characteristic of human language itself, either oral or written. None of these descriptions, however--in a laudable attempt to avoid the restrictions of a limited "skills-centered" approach to literacy instruction--, allow for an alternative conception of literacy as a valuable cultural technology (see Sampson, 1985 and Coulmas, 1989 for such a view among linguists). Neither view of literacy, either as cultural technology or as humanistic discourse, is sufficient alone; rather, both are necessary for a fully adequate understanding of what literacy "is" and what it means to people.

A second caution involves an aspect of education that is troubling to many researchers: literacy instruction as a "cultural invasion" (Delgado-Gaitan, 1989). This danger is presumed to be avoided with an emphasis on Freirian dialogue with learners, a dialogue that draws out the interests of learners and builds literacy instruction upon them. True dialogue can be egalitarian, but, as Stotsky (1991) has argued, sometimes a teacher's political zeal can displace true dialogue with political consciousness

raising along the lines of the teacher's beliefs. When this happens, it is "cultural invasion" as surely as when school discourse and linguistic practices are imposed on people (although in both cases resistance exists as well). Even in true dialogue, however, in which learning and change occur, a kind of cultural invasion transpires. That is, education involves change, and developing new ways of thinking, reading, and writing within a group is a significant change, one that by definition is culturally-embedded. As long as we teach "essayist" literacy, then, we cannot avoid a type of "cultural invasion" (see Scollon and Scollon, 1981 for a clear explication of this point).

Nonetheless, if it is the learners' (or their parents') choice that such new linguistic and cognitive "ways" be learned, then, whether or not others believe--and argue quite convincingly--that these choices are constrained by external, structural factors, those choices should be respected. Not to respect them leads to a patronizing stance which certainly undermines the principle of true dialogue and can undercut effective learning as well (Gundlach, forthcoming).

Much of the rhetoric in the contemporary "literacy crisis" is, in fact, patronizing, at times even forthrightly denigrating (Walsh, 1990). This rhetoric labels Mexican immigrants, among others, as "illiterate" even when they demonstrate functional literacy skills. Why should such persons be deemed "illiterate," or even "semi-literate" because they don't read or write extended text in their (scant) leisure time, or for a living? They use

literacy, and they use the critical thinking processes that people all over the world use, whether or not their languages have a writing system. They use these kinds of thinking in oral language discussions, and they use them in dealing with the "functional" literacy demands of large institutions. The question is not whether a particular group of people can think (all human beings do); the question is whether or not they do a specific kind of thinking with written language that is characteristic of one discourse strand of Western civilization.

I would argue that most of the members of this social network don't currently practice such "essayist" literacy because it makes no sense in their lives to do so. There are exceptions, of course, in the younger generation, who are going to high school, college, and even graduate school; for these members of the network, practicing academic literacy does make sense in their lives. Those continuing beyond high school are making a choice for themselves, and academic literacy is a part of that choice. For most of the adults, however, there is little time in their hard-working lives for the reading of novels, or for attendence in classes at night for long periods of time.

To call people "semi-literate" because they are doing what it makes sense to do in their own lives is to privilege a particular kind of literacy, i.e., "essayist" literacy. On the other hand, to define literacy so as to include oral language activities in totally non-literate peoples makes no sense at all. I would argue, instead, that we (i.e., literacy researchers) use the only common

definition of literacy which endures across cultures and throughout history--knowledge and use of a writing system--and grant that anyone who knows and uses written language adequately in their own lives is literate. This means, of course, that we must give up a (felt) position of superiority, either one of arrogance (we are fully literate; others are less so) or one which is patronizing (everyone is literate, either in oral or written language; or, we are literate and must save those who are not). A stance which seems to me to be more truly egalitarian allows for differences, e.g., between literate and non-literate or among different kinds of literacy, like essayist and "form-filling" literacy, without privileging one kind as being superior in all contexts for all people. The literacy practices of the families I have come to know are neither to be pitied nor exalted; they are quite simply the active and energetic responses of a very resourceful group of people to the demands of a changing and challenging world. As Dinerman (1982: 10) has noted:

> Finally, I depart from the traditional Marxist view of the "peasantry" in that I regard rural agriculturalists and their decisions as neither politically ineffective nor inconsequential to the interests and decisions of more powerful groups. The decision of millions of persons from Mexico to migrate to the United States and to destinations within Mexico has forced these more powerful groups in both societies to take account of them. If it is true that peasants vote with their feet, and that their number now makes a deafening din, then in the broadest sense migration has surely become a political action.

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